



January 27, 2009

Senator John Bruggeman, Chairman
Senate Highways and Transportation Committee

Dear Chairman Bruggeman:

On behalf of the Association of Montana Public Health Officials (AMPHO) and the Montana Public Health Association (MPHA), I am pleased to be here today in support of Senate Bill 237. AMPHO is an organization composed of the directors of local public health departments from across the state whereas MPHA membership encapsulates a variety of public health disciplines and practitioners. Both AMPHO and MPHA have ranked primary enforcement of seatbelts as one of the top public health policy priorities this session.

Public Health's goal is *Healthy People in Healthy Communities*. We do our work in a systematic, population-based approach that includes:

- Preventing epidemics and the spread of disease
- Protecting against environmental hazards
- Promoting and encouraging healthy behaviors
- Responding to disasters and assisting communities in recovery
- Ensuring quality and accessibility of health services and
- **Preventing injuries**

One of the most effective ways to achieve our goals is through policy and environmental change and enactment of a primary seatbelt law is an important policy objective.

Montana is but one of 26 states that have secondary seatbelt enforcement and the *only state* where child restraint laws are secondary. The purpose of a seatbelt is to keep a person in a vehicle as the risk of fatal injury is many times higher if a person is ejected during a crash. SB 237 would go along way in preventing injury and death on Montana's roadways.

HarborView Medical Center in Seattle conducted a study to determine the preventable healthcare costs of unbelted motorists and estimate the budgetary impact of primary seatbelt enforcement in Montana. The study showed that caring for unbelted Montana patients' costs over \$36.7 million each year in direct inpatient health care costs.

Uninsured and Medicaid-covered unbelted occupants cost our state over \$14 million annually for hospital care of their preventable injuries.

Not passing a primary seatbelt law in today's tough economic climate is like throwing money away. States with primary seatbelt laws have seen an increase in usage by 7 to 14%. Current seat belt use in Montana is nearly 80% and an increase to 90 % will save a total of \$18 million in health care costs - \$7 million directly from the state budget. Passing SB 237 will save lives and money.

I'd like to thank Senator Lewis for his leadership in bringing forward this very important piece of legislation and strongly encourage your support.

Sincerely,

Barbara Schneeman, Director
Communications & Advocacy

RiverStone Health (formerly Yellowstone City-County Health Department)
Representing the Association of Montana Public Health Officials (AMPHO)